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**The Iowa Blind History Archive  
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project  
Interview with [Name]  
Conducted by [Name]  
[Date]  
Transcribed by [Name]**

**NOTE: Any text included in brackets [ ] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.**

**Shirley Wiggins, 78, Cedar Rapids, IA  
Karla Ice  
Shirley Wiggins' home in Cedar Rapids, IA  
11-9-2010**

**Karla Ice: Shirley and I probably met a few years ago at an IDB Support Group picnic. The purpose of the interview is that it is a part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's**

**History of blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. I need your verbal consent, Shirley, to have this interview recorded.**

**Shirley Wiggins: That's fine. Yes, I agree.**

**Ice: Very Good. To get started we'll start by asking you your age.**

**Wiggins: Um...**

**Ice: If that's ok?**

**Wiggins: 9/8/32, I'm 78.**

**Ice: Where were you born?**

**Wiggins: Iowa City, Iowa**

**Ice: What was the reason for your blindness or how old were you?**

**Wiggins: I was born with sight, but I was given too much silver nitrate and it burnt the eye. That caused infection in that eye and it went on to the other eye.**

**Ice: What kind of educational experiences did you have? Did you go to the school in Vinton?**

**Wiggins: I went to the school in Vinton. I started in kindergarten.**

**Ice: What kinds of classes or activities there stand out in your mind. What were you most interested in?**

**Wiggins: Well, I was most interested in music, definitely, but we had a very good education, I think. We had all the subjects that...I had a uncle who was my age and he was in public school. We kept notes on what we were learning and I always felt that many times we were ahead of him. No, we had a good education.**

**Ice: I understand that you pursued music for your entire life.**

**Wiggins: Yes I did. Probably not as we were taught it, because I went where we made money. That was in the days of country music all the way. I did a lot of standards, you know, like pop stuff, but most of what we did was country because that's where the jobs were. That's why we were doing it to make money. I entertained for...my first job I wasn't quite 15 and my last paying job I was probably about 70 (Laughter). And now I do entertaining for care centers and things like that.**

**Ice: What instruments did you study?**

**Wiggins: In school I studied piano and I tried the trumpet for awhile. I wasn't going to be Harry James (Laughter) so I quit. No, basically I studied piano and I taught myself to play the accordion and keyboard. I have a keyboard here all the time.**

**Ice: What prompted you to start learning the accordion?**

**Wiggins:** My cousin had one and he hated it. He brought it up when they come to visit us and let me have it for a weekend. I learned a song over the weekend and he was struggling after a year, so they sort of decided that I should have an accordion. When my parents decided to call it quits, they sold my piano and they bought me an accordion. So, I really was sort of forced into it.

**Ice:** Where did you start performing? Where were some of your earlier experiences?

**Wiggins:** Well, there was a fellow who lived across the street from us that used to listen to me practice. So he told the local pub that he knew of someone who could entertain, but she was just a kid. So they called and asked my mother, could I play on Saturday night? They would give me \$5.00, unless I made more than that. She'll probably get tips and if she makes more than \$5.00 we're not giving her \$5.00. Mom said, "She can't come down there without me." They said, "We wouldn't want her to." So that was my first job. I did make all in all more than \$10.00 between their \$5.00 'cause they said they had to pay me and then I made tips. I made a little over \$10.00. For a 14 year old kid that was big money. That's when I decided, this is probably going to be my occupation.

Then my uncle got me a job immediately at the Eagle's Lodge here in Cedar Rapids on Sunday afternoons. They always had this little bar and grill thing opened and they wanted music on Sunday afternoon. That again was another, you know...they guaranteed me, I'd make \$10.00. That was even better, and of course there were people who frowned on it, you know, because back then girls were just

**not entertainers like they didn't just go out and play like today look where they are. I didn't care. I knew I was making an honest living, but that's all I did.**

**I sold "Cloverine Salve". I sold mottos, you know, like "God bless this happy home". Then my step-father made hangers, wooden hangers that you could hang on the door and the little arm would come down and it had grooves in it. You could hang your clothes on it as you ironed. He said, "We'll ask a dollar and a quarter for each one – you get 50 cents I get 75 cents." I sold those things all summer long - made good money; went all over the town of Vinton. I hit every place I think.**

**Ice: How old were you when you were doing...**

**Wiggins: I was 15 and 16.**

**Ice: Uh-huh.**

**Wiggins: I did two summers of it. I was always willing to make money, if I could just... 'cause all my friends, ya know, would go detasseling and stuff like that and they didn't think blind people could detassel. I've learned since that we could, but they didn't think so. The background back then you just...**

**Ice: And so then your music career continued to grow?**

**Wiggins: Yes, it just... Then I met my husband at a convention at the school in Vinton. I had known him when I was small. He was six years older than me, so he graduated when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I think. We met and he played**

**guitar. He could sing. Oh, could he sing! I thought he was pretty wonderful. So, it wasn't long we decided that we would marry. We did. We entertained for...off and on. We entertained for many ears. Unfortunately, after 10 and-a-half years the marriage didn't last, but the music did. We still continued...They wouldn't hire him without me and they wouldn't hire me without him. We were a couple and known that way.**

**I moved to Des Moines, so in Des Moines I got away from him but I had a small band in Des Moines. We kind of had a country-rock band and I can't even tell you the name of the places any more. We played one place on the southeast side. I can't tell you the name of it. Then we played at a place called "Silver Saddle." I don't know if either place is there anymore. But then I came back here and immediately...his name was Lloyd, my first husband. He called and said, "You got a job if you want it." I said "I'll take it." And so then, but he passed away in '76, so then I just had different guitar players, and such, and went on entertaining for quite a while but finally got away from it. It's always there. It's just built in; you can't get away from it.**

**Ice: Back when you were performing with your husband, you went out of town quite a bit for performances?**

**Wiggins: Oh yes.**

**Ice: What kind of transportation arrangements did you make?**

**Wiggins: We hitch hiked... (Laughter)**

**Ice: Because you were both blind?**

**Wiggins: Yeah, we were. But we did...we didn't...(Chuckle) I can remember, we carried white canes. They were the old white canes. They were the old white canes, though, the old crook handle things, you know. A car would go by and Lloyd would hit a rock and go, "I hope you have a flat!" (Thump) If they didn't...but no, we were picked up, usually by truckers. Like oh, I've been in a milk truck and a bread truck. And then if people would have a station wagon, they didn't mind, but we had the accordion, the guitar, an amplifier, two mike stands and a little suitcase, 'cause sometimes we stayed over. We had a lot of luggage to go with us.**

**We usually, we always knew where the best place was to hitch hike. We would take a cab out there and then unload our stuff and stand by the road. We usually always got a ride. I don't recall that we had to turn around and say we didn't get a ride. We sometimes had to wait maybe an hour, but we usually always got a ride.**

**I never feared it except one time. We got in this nice car. That time our instruments were...we were playing in Waterloo and we had a job Thursday, Friday, Saturday night and so we had left our instruments the night before. So we were just the two of us and we were in the back seat. I don't know why I put my hand back, and there was a gun. I grabbed Lloyd's hand and put it back there. I didn't say a word and he didn't either. But evidently, it could have been...he just had it for hunting, you know, but it sure scared me. You never know, but that was the only thing scary that ever happened.**

**But I finally, I gave it up after I had our son. I said I can't take the baby on hitch hiking trips. So I would take the bus and the instruments and if we took Buddy with us we would just take the bus and I could take the instruments and Lloyd could hitch hike alone. The reason for hitch hiking was to save money. That was really the biggest reason.**

**Lloyd ran a radio shop in Vinton for quite a long time. He couldn't always close the shop just...you know, whenever the bus ran, so we'd just go where we...A lot of people in Vinton knew us and if they were going to Waterloo or Cedar Rapids and that's where we were headed they would just stop and pick us up. But no, I was glad when those days were over, too. But it was a fun experience and I was young and very fool hearted. I've hitch hiked to Waukon a lot of times.**

**Ice: So you went up to northeast Iowa too, to perform?**

**Wiggins: Uh-huh. We played quite a few places up in there. That's where he came from, so he could always get jobs up there.**

**Ice: What was the name of your band?**

**Wiggins: Just Lloyd and Shirley.**

**Ice: All right.**

**Wiggins: That's all anybody knew us by was just...Now in Des Moines we called ourselves "The Generation Gap," because we were...Our bass player was 60 years old and our**



**guitar player was, well I think he was 25, but our drummer was just turned 21. He came and begged me, “Can I play the drums with your band on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday?” I said, “Sure and I’ll hire you.” So we’ve got to call ourselves something and so we called ourselves “The “Generation Gap”. Sounded like a good rock name, wouldn’t it?**

**15:00**

**Ice: Yes for sure. What were some of your favorite songs or most requested songs?**

**Wiggins: Oh, through the years, let’s see. All the way from... The later ones, still yet to this day whenever I sing “Somebody Help Me Make It Through The Night” and “I’m Not Lisa”, and um, but we used to do way back, we used to do things that Eddie Arnold did and all those old western singers, you know. As I say, I used to play a few pop things like “All of Me” and things like that and still do when I go out to play because everybody doesn’t just want country. I don’t blame them. Of course being from a Czech town, I have to know some polkas. That’s a necessity.**

**Ice: Now what about with learning music, you learned music...?**

**Wiggins: I learned music in school, but I...what all my piano lessons and voice lessons, everything was written in Braille music or I wrote it myself in Braille music. But I...with this entertaining I, we used to just get the record and learn the words from the records and, um, do it by ear. So you know that’s...I can’t remember, that I could not find one of the**

**chords in the “Beer Barrel Polka”. My aunt had the music and she read what I couldn’t find. She read what I couldn’t find. She said, “Oh, this is what you’re supposed to do.” I think that’s the only time I’ve ever used, really used music to play the accordion. I just...**

**Ice: You’re able to play by ear?**

**Wiggins: Yeah, uh-huh.**

**Ice: What about other kinds of work that you did? You said that you were interested in handicrafts and things like that?**

**Wiggins: Another thing I thought after we talked the other day, I thought about this, I worked in vending 7 years in Des Moines. I worked for one fellow who had a small stand in the old Banker’s Trust building. You were probably never there. It was on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Locust. I worked there for him 5 years, but then he decided he wanted out. In the first place, I went to work for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Then he asked me if I would run it half days. He only wanted to work half days. I said, “Yeah.” So I did and then he decided to get out of it completely. So it was alright because my second husband, Harry, was not very well at the time. I really needed time to be with him any way.**

**So then I called the Department and told them I wanted to work in vending, but was there anything? They turned me over to a fellow who had the Canteen in the Federal building. He had me come down and work a few days and I got acquainted with the place and everything. He said, “Shirley, I’m going to leave you on your own for a week. I’m going to**

**the NFB Convention. So, will you do it?" I said, "I guess I got to." I hoped I was able, because I said I'd only worked a few days and it was a bigger place than I was used to. They had tables and chairs. It was a nice Canteen. I liked it. When he got back he said he had a real bad eye. He was going to go to Iowa City, so he'd be gone for a few days and he came back and said, "I have cancer. Would you please take this place over for me until I get better?" So I then had it for about a year. He didn't get better. I didn't want to keep it. I wanted to get back to Cedar Rapids, because the big VA was here in Iowa City and my Harry needed to be near there. So that's when I came back to Cedar Rapids. But I did work a good seven years in vending. I wasn't always just a musician.**

**Ice: Yes, yes you had quite a variety.**

**Wiggins: Yes I did. My craft, I guess that's what you'd call it a craft. Now I burn CDs constantly. I'm doing for somebody...I do some CD to CD, but I do a lot of putting old records on CDs and cassettes. Right now I've got 60 long plays that they want on CD. That keeps me out of trouble.**

**Ice: Yes, I guess so. You still do some music entertaining?**

**Wiggins: Yes I do. I entertain for care centers and I entertain here. I entertain here every now and then. They ask me to entertain for their...she just asked me a little while ago if I'd entertain for the Christmas party and just different things. Some of the people that live here, now I knew way back when I was a...This one lady that lives here said, "I knew her when she was 18." They know that I**

entertained and they immediately told the lady that was here, "Hey, you get her to entertain for us." It's pretty well known. I enjoy that. It's a job that if I don't want to do it I don't have to do it. I haven't been able to do it for a few months because I had carpal tunnel. I got that taken care of. Now he's given me – he said you can go ahead and go back now, and so I probably will get into that pretty shortly here. I know I've had a couple of calls about December. Once you get back in, they put you on a schedule once a month. I try to divide them so I have one every week instead of bunched up.

**Ice:** That sounds good. What about your family? You have one son?

**Wiggins:** I have one son.

**Ice:** And a couple of granddaughters?

**Wiggins:** Two granddaughters. I see them a lot. My son comes every Friday for lunch. My granddaughters, the one in Waterloo, I don't see her as often. She works for US Cellular. She's been with them about 8 or 9 years. They gave her an opportunity she couldn't afford to turn down. I guess she likes it there. She bought a house there, so she better. My other granddaughter is going to Kirkwood. She was working for another phone company too, but she just got let go a few months ago, so right now she said, "Grandma I don't really care", because it gives her more time to give to Kirkwood. She wants to get out of it the end of this semester. She's of course in some type of technology. Who isn't? It should make her good money. My

**son works for Worley Warehousing. He's been with them 30, just about 32 years now.**

**Ice: Did he ever take any interest in music?**

**Wiggins: No, not at all. He loves it, but he just doesn't...I don't think he can even...I know he couldn't as a child; couldn't sing a tune. He always wanted to sing with me. We'd sing songs together and my girlfriend used to say, "He's so bad, it sounds like you're trying to harmonize." (Laughter) But he tried.**

**Ice: Does he have memories of being a little kid and going around with you and your husband when you were performing? Or was he too little to remember?**

**Wiggins: Yeah, because we didn't take him into the places where we entertained. We just took him along and usually knew people. When we went northeast, his grandparents lived up there, so they could stay with them while we went to entertain. I didn't want to do that.**

**Ice: What other community activities have you been involved in?**

**Wiggins: Well, um, where does our support group come?**

**Ice: That would definitely come in there.**

**Wiggins: The support group is because of Independent Living, I think. I've been with Independent Living for the Department for 26 years now and when I had been with them**

**for 4 or 5, I don't know, probably 10 years they came up with these support groups. They asked me if I would kind of help out with one here in Cedar Rapids. I said, "Well, I wasn't too interested," but I did it just one time. I just grabbed right on to it. I don't think I really knew what I was getting into. I didn't know when I started; I didn't know what this meant. What am I suppose to do? Then going to one and meeting the people. At the very first one, the person who was our teacher at that time was Racine and she brought 23 people to that very first meeting. When I saw who they were and what their...Yeah, I will do this. I really wanted to do it. I've never been sorry.**

**Now I've been with them for - I always have to think about it - it's been I think Tom and I figured it's been 15 years. There was out of everyone that was there at that first one, all that's left now is just Tom Nutt and Karen Arnold and myself. All of them have passed away or there's been a few that have moved away. But we still keep...I think that the one we had last week there was 19. If there's extra things, like if someone comes from the Department, we get more, there's more interest. We reach a spot right now, I don't have any speakers, but I'll get on that again after Christmas. I've gone through all the speakers we had and I'm using our people. I'm letting each one of them go each month, tell a little bit about their background, their family and their education. Some of them of course weren't blind as young people, so I have them tell us a little bit about what it was like before and how they have accepted the loss of their vision. It's interesting; they are pretty open about it. I enjoy that very much. I enjoy Independent Living. Like I said I've been with them 26 years and I have no intentions of quitting. I told Becky I'll be here another 26! (Laughter)**

**Ice: In the blindness community, are you involved in any advocacy groups?**

**Wiggins: I think we figure our support group is. I do belong to the Iowa Council of United Blind, which is an affiliate of the American Council and I am the president of our Cedar Rapids chapter. We meet not every month, because we are a small chapter. We only have, what did she inform me the other day...we have 12 members. But we try to stay active. We are going to have a big Christmas party in Vinton the 20<sup>th</sup> of September and we have an auction and good fellowship. We talk about the topics of interest to blind people and what we should be knowing. What things in the NFB both are working on together and things like that. Yeah, I guess that's all you can do. We just keep hanging in. I said, "You know we're not the biggest group in the world, but neither was David?" You got to think (Laughter). So, you know, it's...and my feelings, if there are any feelings, I have absolutely nothing against people who belong to the NFB. We have a right to believe how we want to believe. There's not always that much difference in the way we believe. That's the thing that I have come to know.**

**30:00**

**Ice: What about technology changes you have seen over the years.**

**Wiggins: Oh my yes. I of course started out just simply with nothing but Braille, and went all the way through school with nothing but Braille – I went all the way – I can't remember**

**when we were out of school, anything, notes we had to take, letters we had to write. If we did write words down, everything was Braille, Braille, Braille.**

**The talking books, if we got talking books, those records, some of them were so scratchy you could hardly hear the book. You'd go over them and over them so you didn't miss a word. To get books in Braille was almost not worth it because there were so many volumes the mailman would complain about it. It was really difficult. Then all of a sudden they came out with the cassettes. That was a big improvement as far as reading and education, I'm sure, because it was much lighter for students to carry. That's the problem; no one, no blind person should ever be left in the cold as far as Braille. They should know Braille.**

**I understand it's getting harder to...there's too much technology. It's so much easier to carry around a little recorder or to, in many cases, they have the notebooks now and different things are so much better than carrying books and books. No one should be without Braille. No one should be without a slate and stylus at least.**

**I go by the slate and stylus even before I do the Braille writer. Actually, I was taught with the slate and stylus. Most of my friends, that are my age, stick with the slate and stylus. I think you interviewed someone last week who does have the Braille writer. I have a Braille writer, but I really have not much use for it because I basically Braille CDs, write out the name of what it is and oh, my grocery list, things like that. That doesn't require a Braille writer. It's so much easier to grab your slate, but the technology; I've gone on with it now.**

**I finally got with the computer and I'll never be a wiz with it, but I like knowing what I know and I of course...we**



**all email. I kind of like that. Sometimes I kind of get fed up with certain things, but I do like emailing. I also have learned to...again...music, to burn CDs with the computer and I've learned to be able to get to download from different places. I've learned – what is this latest thing, I can't think of it right now – but through the library now I can download books.**

**Ice: The digital.**

**Wiggins: Yeah. I can download the books and decide if I want to put them on a thumb drive or get rid of them, or if I want to keep them on a cartridge. It's fascinating. You just can't...it's fun to go on Google and look up things. Those are the things, I think of people who work with them all the time and what a blessing it must be to them because they can just...I put our roll calls on the computer and both ICUB chapter and our support group and then I can send that back and forth with our treasurer. It used to be that you had to Braille all that out and hope it would get there in time for the next meeting. As far as I can see it's endless, don't you think?**

**Ice: I think so.**

**Wiggins: It just goes on and on. There's just no way you could ever keep up with all of it. Every time I pick up the "White Cane" book we get, every time I pick that up there's something new. And the telephones, I just can't get over these cell phones, what all they will do. I have no need for all of that and will never have one. I read how they can play music over them; they can just do everything with them. I**

**had an opportunity to play with one at the convention last year. That's all they are – they're a toy! (Laughter) Only a very expensive toy.**

**Ice: Yes. In June of 2008 there was an event that changed your life.**

**Wiggins: Yes, very much. Yeah, I don't even know what to say about the flood other than, I mean, it was just so unexpected. You just couldn't even – I couldn't even fathom what it could be like. I mean we were called; my girlfriend and I had gone to a visitation of one of the people that had passed away in our support group. We were standing there talking and this fellow says we better all of us get headed for home, I hear the water is comin' our way. Well, we come down the street. I, at that time, lived on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street around the corner from Wells Fargo Bank, on the southwest side. I said, "We'd better turn the corner and go to the bank 'cause I've got to get some money before we go grocery shopping. She got there, "Shirley we can't, the water's coming right up 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue." I said, "You're kidding!" She said, "No I'm not." Well I said, "We better get in the house and see what's going on."**

**We went in the house, I wasn't there only a minute and the phone rang. It was a gentleman with Emergency Response. He said, "Mrs. Wiggins, do you have a way out? The water is coming right for you. You've got to leave, I mean immediately." I said, "Really?" He said, "If you're able, can you turn off the electricity, the water and the gas?" I said, "Yes, I know how to do that." He said, "Please do those things and get out." Then about that time, my friends Tom and Cindy Nutt called and said, "We hear you're**

going to get flooded pretty bad. If you need a place to come, you come to us.” I called back and said, “I guess I need a place to come.” “Well, come on up.” And I did. But we all thought it’ll come and go. So none of us took much with us, just a few....

The next day my granddaughter called and said, “Grandma your house is gone.” I said, “Oh honey.” She said that she had gone by it in the morning and the water was up to the deck. She said, “I thought it will be ok, but now all you can see is just the top of the roof.” I said, “Oh, no!” I said, “Tammy!” I kind of started laughing, you know, ‘cause she likes to joke and she started crying and I knew she wasn’t kidding.

I just stayed with Tom and Cindy for 3 months. I was back and forth. There were so many things to take care of. You have to get to your insurance to find out that all these years you paid into it you won’t get one penny because the water did it and of course none of us had actual flood insurance. I felt sorry for that lady. She said, “Shirley I wish the house had burned.” She said, “If you had had a fire, you would have gotten \$90,000. The way it is you don’t get nothing.” That’s sad.

Ice: Yes it is.

Wiggins: You just think of all those years, I was there 33 years. Then I really didn’t get...I went back to the house after the water was way down – gone. I couldn’t go with my boy because my boy, he lived in Palo and he was totally flooded out, so he was staying with friends.

My brother and his girlfriend finally came and took me over to the house. They just did their best. My

**granddaughter, Tammy, they did their best to get what they could get. They couldn't get much. It was just like my granddaughter said she was going to go in the bedroom and see if she couldn't get me something. It had filled the mattress. She said, "The mattress was as high as your head would be, Grandma. I couldn't even move the bed." She said everything was just...**

**The refrigerator was lying on its side. The stove was a brand new stove. I had just bought my stove about a week before the flood. I had re-carpeted the kitchen. I had just put on new siding too. It was all gone, just like that. You can't do much about it except, (tears) you just go on. In fact I cry more about it now than I did then. I didn't cry then, I just couldn't. It's weird, you know. I've got to get a Kleenex...It's just the way it is.**

**43:24**

**(End of Recording 1)**

**(Beginning of Recording 2)**

**Wiggins: I couldn't cry. I tried to think of where there were things and you know...now I can think. I still think of things that I wish I had and don't.**

**Ice: Sure.**

**Wiggins: I'm always trying to, um...well I have to make fudge and I can't find the pan that I made fudge with. 'Cause I had certain dishes for those things. Some of them, I would tell Bobby, "Please, (that's my brother) try to find that pan I**

**always baked the beans in for the picnic.” Well, he did find it. He said, “I was scared to death.” ‘Cause he said the walls were so soaked, he said, “I was afraid that the cupboards would start falling.” I said, “No, I don’t want that! I don’t want anyone getting hurt on top of all this.”**

**The accordion, my accordion was just full of water. It was absolutely ruined. So now, my accordion...one of the ladies that belonged to the support group had an accordion that she wasn’t playing anymore. She called me up and asked me, “What happened to your accordion, Shirley, is it gone?” I said, “Yeah, it is.” “Well, I got one for you.” I said, “No, you can’t do that.” She said, “Yes I can, because I’ll never play it again.” So I have her accordion. It’s old, but it does the job. That’s the main thing.**

**Everyone has been very kind. You realize, a thing like this, you realize who your friends really are. People have been very good. Trying their best to help us through, whatever.**

**At the time my biggest concern was where am I going to live? Oh, I had my name in, I don’t know how many places, but everyone was trying to find a place to live. So you know, I just put myself in God’s hands and I got this and I said “I’m taking it.” It’s like you were saying. It’s not your home, but you know your home will never be. It’s not...you can’t put it back together. It was an older house, but it was well preserved. It was well taken care of. I took good care of it. It would have lasted me forever. It’s too old to put a lot of money in. I’ve got to figure, they sent me a figure on what it would cost to rebuild it, \$56,000. Now, at my age, I’m about to put \$56,000 in it? No. It’s just the way it is. Really it’s just a...I really don’t think about it much. I try not to, because if I say it’s more upsetting to me now than it**

**was when it actually happened. It was upsetting. I think I was just probably going...I know there were some people that just broke down. That doesn't do any good. You've got to go on and face it and decide where you are going to go from there. And do it. That's kind of...I heard somebody laugh the other day at Independent Living. I forget what it was even about. I said, "You just roll with the punches." Then one of the gals in Independent Living said, "Yeah, that's Shirley, just roll with the punches." That's really all you can do.**

**Ice: Yep. That's for sure. Anything else? Are you still in touch with any of the people you went to school with?**

**Wiggins: Oh yes, a lot of them. Oh yeah, in fact, yeah, a lot of them. But we've lost so many just in the last 7 or 8 years, because blind people seem to have a way of keeping in touch with the people of all ages. We all just understand each other and what we've gone through. Most of us had gone through the school in Vinton. Most of them my age and even way down to...oh, like I have really close friends. My closest young friend is 46, but you see that's 36 years between. But I know people that have passed away that were 30 years older than me. A lot of the people that we we're all close to, used to get together with, in Dubuque and different places, just in the last few years, we've lost a lot of them. We've lost some that were even in the late 40's. Well, now see my first husband was the class of '45 and his whole class is gone. Then again I know some that are still...One of my very dearest friends is class of '42 and she is 88. She's in good shape, you know. It...yeah, yeah, I still know a lot of**

**people. I'm glad of that, because we all in some way stay close.**

**Another thing that has helped that I think is this phone thing, being able to get hooked up so you can talk anytime, anywhere. It really doesn't cost that much. It's worth it, because you can just pick that phone up and just call anybody, anywhere. I have some friends that really use it! (Laughter) They're not going to hang up. (Laughter) You just have to take time for...**

**I learned many things from that flood. One of them is the importance of friends. You just want to cherish that and respect it because sometimes you don't always think about how valuable they really are. Oh, you know, I'm tired of hearing their...(chuckle) But no, any more you just stop and think – no, they have a problem and it might not be as great as I think, but it's great for them.**

**Ice: Anything else you would like to comment on? About community activities or your family, raising children as a blind person?**

**Wiggins: It has its ups and downs raising children as a blind person. You have to keep your ears open constantly. You have to try your best to keep right on top of...I know one of the first things my granddaughter said to me one time. "Grandma I'm not going to try anything, Dad says you'll catch me!" (Laughter) Well, I know there were a few things that...but then does even sighted parents know everything? I know my mom sure didn't know everything I did. (Laughter) But it is a problem, because you know you go places and take your child with you and you kind of sit on**

**pins all the time – Please don't' do anything you shouldn't – but it, it...**

**I know blind people that have 5-6 kids and I don't know how they handle it. I really don't know how they can handle them. Now I have a very dear friend, over here by Marshalltown, that had two and she just plain told the doctor, "I don't want any more." And he said, "Well, no." She said, "You know I know how many I can handle and two is it and that's it!" That is the truth. I would have liked to have a second one, but it just didn't happen and so, you know, but now I think it wasn't suppose to, with things that happened, one was enough. So no I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world. We have our ups and downs.**

**I had some very good help; with his grandparents. They were very good about...His grandma and grandpa, Lloyd's folks, lived up northeast on a farm. He learned a lot of things up there during the summer and such. That was good for a boy to know. My dad, who was here in Cedar Rapids, was in plumbing and heating. Bud learned a lot from his grandpas - grandfathers - that I would not have been able to teach him. I appreciate that. I wanted him to have a normal life. I do think it's challenging, though.**

**Ice: Anything else about activities in the community that you're involved in or have been involved in over the years?**

**Wiggins: Well um...**

**Ice: Any legislative activities at all?**

**Wiggins: I used to be more in legislation than I have the last...It used to be that we all had legislative committees,**



even the chapters, but we don't seem to have so much...I mean we used to be right there for all the legislative meetings in the winter and the spring. We don't seem to do as much of that as we used to. I know that both groups go one day, I think it is, and meet the different legislators. We used to have a representative that went all the time, that through all the legislation. They don't seem to do that much anymore. It's tiresome. I've never done it. I've sat through two or three days and said I don't want to go any farther with this. (Chuckling) But I think it's important to keep on top of it because they are always trying to push things that might, in some way hurt the Department for the Blind. That's our interest here in Iowa, I think, before anything...

**Ice:** Anything more about your education or any teachers that stand out in your mind at Vinton; that were particularly influential?

**Wiggins:** Yeah.

**Ice:** Any experiences you had there?

**Wiggins:** Of course my choir director and voice teacher. She was just a friend to me plus I learned a lot about music from her. I think most all our music instructors were quite good. We had, when I went to school there, we had three blind teachers. One of them died, but we had two very good blind teachers. Dorothy O'Leary. I don't know if you got here in time to meet her or not.

**Ice:** I don't think so.

**Wiggins:** She started teaching there when I was in first grade. I had her; she was a third grade teacher. She was very good and she also kept up on what you were doing bad. (Chuckle) We had another one that, I was always just amazed. Her name was Beulah Burdine. She later married. Beulah was not only totally blind, she had this affliction on her hands. She had only one finger on one hand and only one and a half fingers on the other. I guess her feet were similar to that. She had to have special shoes. But, that lady could read Braille and type and do anything. She used to come and type our letters for us to our parents. She could type just as fast as anybody and she was excellent with Braille. In fact, she developed a Braille shorthand, of which she taught me a little. I don't know too much. I know some of the kids took it and really went for it. She was good with that and...

**15:00**

**Wiggins:** Dorothy wrote a book. What do they call it? I read it so long ago. "Gleamings" I think they call it; just "Gleamings." She was McCutchen when I first had her. Then she married Protuse. They separated. Then she married O'Leary. I think it was under Dorothy Protuse. There was somebody else; there were two names on that as authors. It was actually Dorothy's "Gleaning". It was about the school from the time it opened until the late 70s or 80s; pretty thorough. There were some things I didn't agree with, I remember. I talked to her about them, but...every time, she'd say, "That must have been the part I didn't write." (Laughter) They were good teachers. Both of them were good teachers.

**There was only one I just could not – I just could not – As a child there was one nobody liked except me. We had a lady named Mrs. Reed, Elma Reed, and she was mean, I guess. As a little girl, I was quiet. I was a sweet little girl, I never sassied back. I studied. I really worked. I really loved school as a little kid. I really did. In second grade we were suppose to learn grade 1 ½ Braille. I was way ahead. She was always good to me. I never got punished or scolded. A lot of them really had trouble with her. I kind of always feel bad when I say “I never had trouble with her,” but when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she and I did have a round. I remember she said, “What happened to that dear little girl?” I said, “She grew up.” (Laughter) That’s all I said. She was a good teacher. When you got through with her you knew you had been taught well. You had learned well. I said maybe that’s what you guys didn’t like about her. She was too thorough.**

**I remember starting in kindergarten; there were four of us that were only blind. There was two boys and two girls and I was one of the girls. The four of us were also way ahead of the other kids. We got our little things done before and we got to play in the doll house, before they did. We stayed that way. We stayed far ahead and I think we lost one. She failed. Not because...she was sick one year a lot. She fell back a grade, but you know. When it’s easy for the teachers, it makes it easier for you.**

**Ice: Sure. Anything else you would like to comment on as life as a blind person in Iowa?**

**Wiggins: Ok. I’ve always been treated well. I had, as I told you in our first interview, I had a wonderful childhood. I can’t in any way complain about my childhood. My parents,**

**before they moved to Vinton because of me, lived out on a little acreage by West Branch. I knew all the farm kids up and down the road and they just stopped on their way and picked me up. I ran and played with them before I ever went to kindergarten. I honestly didn't know what it was to be blind. When we moved to Vinton, my parents moved there because I was the only child. They just wanted to be where their child was. They bought a home there. I stayed at school. Only on the weekends I went home. I did stay at school all week long. They thought it was the best and I do too. I never regret living at the school. I had a good childhood.**

**The neighborhood kids....But you've got to have initiative. You can't be an introvert or you're not going to make it. I think that's what happens to a lot of blind kids. Two things: their parents feel sorry for them possibly and hold them back from playing with other kids. Other kids don't really get to know them. They don't have enough – there's not enough extrovert about them that they say A) I'm going to do it. Where my parents were young, and they never, they just didn't...I remember one time wantin' to walk up this farm road to see my friends and Mom said, "I don't know if she should do that." I remember hearing her say that. My Dad said, "God gave her a tongue, she can use it if she gets lost." And you know, I've always thought of that and I think that my parents gave me a lot of what I am. They never held me back. I know there were things I did, that they had to have thought, "She shouldn't do that; she might get hurt." But I did and they didn't stop me.**

**I know some other blind people, like myself, who had good experiences, but I also know the other side of the coin. They are still not extroverts. They're still afraid to speak up,**

**afraid to take a step farther than their door and that's never been my case; never. I suppose I got to give the school some credit because they didn't hold me back either.**

**They said we couldn't go to town. They said blind kids couldn't go to town without a partial. I was the one who said, "I don't know why not? I live here and I go all the time at home." Well, they pushed that and finally they got it through just about the time I got out of school. They got it through that, yes, blind kids could go, if they really felt they knew their way downtown and, so forth, they could go.**

**Another thing I felt that they, the school was not...they always made sure that the blind kids had a server at their table, that would serve our plates. Another blind gal and I decided – we don't want to do that. We are never going to learn anything if we don't know how to serve each other, so we brought it before the Superintendent and there were some of the Matrons. Our Matrons were elderly and lived in the yesterday, kind of you know. The Superintendent said, "Lets try it, lets see how it works." So we started. There were six of us at the table, and each one of us would take a week. We had one full semester. Each one of us had three weeks and we came out all right. One girl and I wrote a song about it and he said, "You know you did all right. From now on if the blind kids want to serve themselves or each other, that will be allowed."**

**I figure I got that from my Mom and Dad. That's where I got my initiative. My Mom and Dad were both, more or less, extroverts. Mom was big in...She wasn't so big in belonging to clubs, but she was big into helping people and doing for people and things like that. My Dad never knew a stranger and I think that's where I got it, which I really believe the blind person, has at least some of it, is far better off.**

**There's something else we talked about last week...Oh! This is only my firm belief. I do believe that if there is something that you need to learn, not like Braille...I think Braille can be taught by anyone...things like that. Lets just say, say you want to learn how to put batteries in a recorder or things like that. I think that if a blind person teaches another blind person, they pick it up quicker. The sighted person still does it with their eyes while they are trying to teach the blind person. It doesn't work out right. Like, I have my friend over by Marshalltown, she knows it, and she's kind of clumsy like that. I just sat down with her and just take the recorder apart and just show her. Just look at this how it is. I just go from there and she picks right up. She'll say, "Oh, Craig tried to show me and I just couldn't learn it." I said, "Because he doesn't show you, he's lookin' at it and going by that." So many things I think if a blind person can show a blind person, you know, that can go with some partials – some partials are pretty good at it.**

**If I go to a strange town...when I first went to Des Moines, I knew very little about it. I just called a blind person I knew and I said, "Hey, would you come and show me? I need to get to the...then the Commission was over on the east side. I wanted to go over there and get a cane and something else. I just need to learn my way around Des Moines. That's how I learned it, was with him. He just..." "Yeah, I'll show you where...how to get downtown from where you're at. I went from the bus depot, because I was still living here. I would go in to see some friends of mine and I'd take the bus. That was our starting point. We got along real well. You ask a sighted person and they'll say "Well, you go to the corner." Well okay, so where's the corner, is it a block away? (Laughter) I think, I bet ya that**

**our teacher now is better at it than some of the sighted ones we've had. I haven't heard any big complaints. (Chuckle)**

**I think some of the people that are...the adults...that are losing their vision, I really feel sorry for them. I have to really watch it in Support Group so that I don't have a pity party. Some of them you just want to reach out and say "Oh, this is too bad this had to happen." But at the same time, you know that's not what we're there for. Sometimes I've heard some of them say, "It's just too hard on me. I just can't"...That's because you're not going to learn if they're... now...but its just...That's just another thing that really sounds silly, but I'm very thankful that I've been blind all my life. I always feel that if that was supposed to be my cross, it's the lightest of all I could have had. That's how I really do feel. People, some people, I've had people say you don't mean that. But I do mean that. You don't miss what you've never had. You learn to live with what you have, or you should. I guess how I really feel about blindness. I have no complaints with it. Oh, sometimes when I hit my shin on something real hard or something like that I kind of say, "Oh, ouch! Why?" Really, I have no complaints. I really truly do feel it's...I would rather this than any other handicap that I can think of. I dropped a can of Pepsi last night. "I don't want to have to ask Karla the minute she gets here"...**

**(Laughter) I thought...I'll kick around...I finally found it this morning, it had rolled way over here under the table. I was filling the refrigerator and I dropped one of them. I thought it didn't make any noise, so it must be on the carpet somewhere. There are some funny things about being blind that happens to you. You have to just laugh at it and go on.**

**Ice: Well, anything else?**

**Wiggins: I can't think of anything.**

**Ice: Well, thank you so much, Shirley, for your time. This has been wonderful.**

**Wiggins: Thank you, Karla.**

**32:03**

**(End of Recording 2)**

**Deb Brix**

**January 29, 2011**